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Garden Variety Experiential Education: The "Material Turn" and Environmental Ethics

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In most years, central Arkansas is blessed with a long and lovely autumn. Warm days, cool nights, and alternating periods of sun and rain supply conditions favorable to fall gardening. Cole crops like broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts do well at this time of year, as do lettuce, spinach, carrots, radishes, Swiss chard, kale, and collards, among others. Out of the question are tomatoes, peppers, corn, or melons, but plenty of other possibilities present themselves, enough to give college students the experience of playing productively in the dirt.

"Productive play in the dirt" may be the hook that gets honors students at the University of Central Arkansas to take my junior seminar called Philosophy, Principles, and Practices of Organic Horticulture. They often express considerable enthusiasm for a class that gets them outside and working with their hands for much of the term, but this is not my primary reason for offering the course. With this seminar, I hope students will begin to learn, literally first-hand, the ecological reasons for an ethical relationship to nature. Organic gardening is one of the best courses for conveying such a message, largely

because ample evidence exists to suggest that its counterpart—conventional farming and gardening—can wreak significant ecological harm. Peripheral and uninteresting though agriculture (of any kind) may have become to many Americans, it nevertheless remains an excellent subject with which to raise Socrates's age-old question "How shall we live?" Unlike the Sage of Athens, however, we must now pose the question with a twenty-first-century twist: How shall we live such that other life—that which is the source of our daily bread—and its supportive habitats can also flourish?

By no means is mine the only gardening course to be introduced to honors collegiate education. Readers are encouraged to investigate, for example, a similar project initiated at Longwood University by Michael Lund and Geoffrey Orth, whose article "From the White House to Our House: The Story of an Honors College Vegetable Garden" appeared in the 2010 issue of *Honors in Practice.* Like Lund and Orth, I have found gardening to be a fine pedagogical tool to encourage honors students to think deeply on the subject of manual skill as a means of connecting intellectual endeavor to the material world. A course requiring students to use both their heads and hands in pursuit of a concrete, material outcome (an edible one!) offers an opportunity to explore numerous questions relevant not only to environmental ethics specifically but also to the enactment of thought in the world through human bodies, the translation of ideas into material realities. How does theory lend itself to specific principles, and how do these in turn suggest particular courses of action? Or consider the reverse: if a given practice works in the material world to produce a desired result, does it suggest a truth that we should articulate in our principles and philosophy? How do we determine whether a practice yielding short-term success will also make possible an enduring one? Does the natural world present standards for quality, and, if so, what techniques are necessary to discover them and to achieve results that measure up? To what extent is an activity like gardening or farming a cooperative endeavor—more dialogue than monologue, more marriage than ego trip—between the artisan and the prevailing conditions and materials, such as weather, climate, water, soils, and seeds? What are the ethics of human attempts to modify any of these conditions?

Here I will pause to offer nuts-and-bolts information. The honors seminar I teach is always scheduled for late-afternoon, seventy-five-minute periods, twice a week. About a third of our meetings are held indoors for the purpose of focused discussion; the other two-thirds are spent working as a class in our campus garden. Each student must also put in six additional hours of outdoor

work, scheduled in an ad hoc fashion throughout the season as the garden itself presents specific demands: the radishes need weeding, for example, or everything needs watering, or frost is on the way and must be guarded against by putting down row cover. The space we use is located in one of the less-frequented campus quads and was made available to us by the university administration when several faculty and I proposed a garden be established and named for one of UCA's most famous alumni, Dorris Alexander "Dee" Brown, known best for his 1970 history, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.* Although I teach Organic Horticulture only in fall semesters, the space is nevertheless kept productive and attractive for three seasons a year, thanks to the help of work-study students (often veterans of my course) who maintain it during the spring and summer terms. Although my seminar is, to date, the only teaching use made of the space, a colleague in anthropology used it for a time for research projects with his students, growing heirloom plants for their seeds. A grant of $3,000 from a university development fund covered the initial costs of building a sturdy cedar shed and stocking it with tools. Nominal expenses that recur from year to year are funded by the honors college's budget.

Our fall semester begins in the third week of August. About a month ahead of that date, I start flats of seeds at my home to be sure the students will have seedlings ready for transplanting by about mid-September. I also provide students with seeds for quick-growing crops like lettuce and spinach to give them the experience both of planting and transplanting. The class spends the first few weeks of the term learning how to establish and manage a compost pile and how to prepare beds—pulling out old plants and weeds, turning and amending the soil, raking it smooth—at the same time that they begin reading from the "how-to-and-why" book they have purchased. A little later in the term, when the hectic pace of planting has abated, we turn to reading selections on the history of both organic and conventional agriculture as well as items of a more philosophical bent; these include portions of *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*; Michael Pollan's *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*; Matthew B. Crawford's *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*; and *Organic, Inc.,* by Samuel Fromartz. Various essays by Wendell Berry and Barbara Kingsolver, among others, also appear on the syllabus.

As crops mature and become edible, we begin scheduling periodic class dinners, cooking our produce together in a kitchen located within the honors center and sharing it on site. These dinners—usually three of them, including

a harvest supper at the very end of the semester—are held during regularly scheduled class meetings, at which time we resume discussion of our reading and of our ongoing garden work. By early December the course is nearly over and the garden has about given out, succumbing to short daylight and near-constant cold. Getting in some last, hopeful planting of crops that can overwinter (garlic, for example), students then learn to put the garden to bed, that is, to cover it heavily with mulch. For a final exam, they complete an eight-page research paper on some aspect of sustainable agriculture or the larger cultural movement to which it belongs. Throughout the semester they have compiled a reading journal; now they add their final entry, a two- or three-page meditation on their personal harvest for the course.

The final meditations often yield expressions of gratitude for a course that has allowed students to explore a moral aspiration they often bring with them to the class: to live in harmony with natural rhythms or, in other words, to live as peacefully and nonviolently as possible. Without quite realizing it, they are saying exactly what I mean when I speak of an ethical relation to nature. They also express great happiness at having learned practical skills, as though learning how to grow healthy food while also creating an ecologically healthy, beautiful space has rendered them less fearful of adulthood, more confident in their ability to take care of themselves in daily life than they were before.

The students' reaction seems to confirm a central tenet of sustainable agriculture, articulated best by Wendell Berry, that careful gardening and farming are never done in the abstract. They are never done on paper or in a book or in one's daydreams but always in the real, physical world where human intention must be enacted using non-human materials like soil and seeds. Moreover, good work of this kind is never done in exactly the same way from one parcel of land to the next or even from one season to the next on the same plot of ground. The work is radically local, spatially and temporally bounded. "The standard [for quality] exists" in nature, Berry asserts, but the particulars of quality in horticulture must be discovered over and over again, virtually every time we handle seedlings or ply a shovel (266). If we want to do good work with quality results, then prevailing physical and biological realities must be studied and met with a certain humility, with an attitude something like admiring respect for their limits as well as for their possibilities. "What will nature allow us to do here?" becomes the operative question. Unspoken but generally assumed is the desire to do valuable work on this ground without doing inordinate violence to nature's own predilections—"inordinate" because we also recognize that neither a garden nor a farm is

truly natural; rather, it is a place that has been manipulated in the service of human ends, using the human knowledge, labor, and skill that collectively compose our technology. A certain degree of violation has indeed occurred insofar as the original conditions have been modified.

Sustainable agriculture's emphasis on its own localized, non-abstract, involved-in-the-world character appears to dovetail with recent thinking underway in a host of other, apparently unrelated arenas, from quantum physics to feminist theory, from environmental literary criticism to reconsiderations of the blue-collar trades and their place in the Information Age. "A 'material turn' is going on" at present, observes ecocritic Serenella Iovino, adding that it represents in part a rejection of the twentieth century's so-called "linguistic turn" and its offspring, post-structuralism. This contemporary "renaissance of matter," as Iovino terms it, "is conveyed by concepts such as 'agential realism,' 'vital materialism,' 'trans-corporeality,' 'intra-action,' 'post-humanist performativity,' [and] 'material ecocriticism." She cites such thinkers as Karen Barad, Bruno Latour, Andrew Pickering, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Stacy Alaimo, and David Abram, among others. To this list I would add Matthew B. Crawford, author of *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*.

The claim common to these otherwise disparate writers is two-fold. First, the inanimate, material world is never so inert or passively receptive to human intention as one might like to believe; matter has properties that exhibit agency of a kind, however subtly or even inaccessibly to human comprehension. Second, human action in the world of matter is consequently never truly a one-sided affair, never strictly linear in the simple sense of a subject acting upon an object. As physicist-cum-feminist theorist Karen Barad puts it, "the primary ontological unit[s]" in the world are not even entities or things, as implied by terms like "subject" and "object," but rather "phenomena," by which she means things-in-relation (139). "In my agential realist elaboration," she writes, *"phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting 'agencies.'* That is, phenomena are ontologically primitive relations" (emphasis Barad's; 139). Her neologism "intra-action" is distinct from the more usual "interaction" because the latter, Barad insists, assumes a fundamental and complete separability of firmly bounded, isolate entities. For her and other thinkers on agential materialism, this assumption of separability may be a useful and necessary fiction in much of our daily lives, but we should learn to appreciate that it is only a fiction for at least one crucial reason: whenever intra-action includes human actors, it carries ethical import.

Furthermore, the ethical edge cuts more than one way, shaping all of the various agents involved in a given instance of "phenomena."

As you might guess, all of this theory can get pretty heady, pretty fast. For mere mortals like college students, the more accessible writer to turn to—both for an appreciation of the agency of matter and for insight into the ethical ramifications—is Matthew B. Crawford. Himself no slouch of a philosopher, Crawford is never happier than when his hands are deep into the guts of a motorcycle engine in need of repair. I offer one representative passage, which follows a description he has given of the elaborate and physically demanding steps that riders of early-model motorcycles had to go through just to start them. Pointing out that the whole process required considerable judgment, Crawford extrapolates from the example to comment on what deep engagement with a machine can mean for the person involved:

> The necessity of such judgment calls forth human excellence. In the first place, the intellectual virtue of judging things rightly must be cultivated, and this is typically not the product of detached contemplation. It seems to require that the user of a machine have something at stake, an *interest* of the sort that arises through bodily immersion in some hard reality, the kind that kicks back. Corollary to such immersion is the development of what we might call a subethical virtue: the user holds himself responsible to external reality, and opens himself to being schooled by it. His will is educated—both chastened and focused—so it no longer resembles that of a raging baby who knows only what he wants. . . . [T]echnical education seems to contribute to moral education. (60)

Thus we find "a paradox in our experience of agency: to be master of [our] own stuff entails also being mastered by it" (57)—mastered by it because stuff itself, matter outside ourselves, exhibits agency. We might hear in these simple statements an echo, still reverberating after almost two hundred years, of Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim in his little book *Nature* that the world of matter is always, among other things, our disciplinarian, in the richest sense of the word (26).

It may seem that we have, in just a few pages, left far behind honors students' "productive play in the dirt." After all, dirt is not a machine, not inanimate matter; on the contrary, it is riddled through and through with billions of life forms, all of them "intra-acting" out their own dramas. This very fact complicates the ethics of gardening and farming well beyond what Crawford

has in mind since to mistreat dirt—to bring to it an inappropriate "technical education"—is to do much greater harm than one does by mistreating a machine. To mistreat dirt is to invite, over time, truly serious hard realities that "kick back": land and soil degradation, erosion, poor yields, nutrient-deficient crops, and loss of important wildlife such as pollinating insects. Complicating the picture Crawford paints by substituting soil for motorcycles may approximate the multi-directional ethics that Barad describes. One must tread carefully here; claiming that an ethics is underway in soil or by soil sounds, on its face, extravagantly anthropomorphic. Asserting that there is agency in matter, though, need not entail claiming that intention is present. "Compost Happens," as a bumper sticker claims. Compost, dirt, soil, and earth happen, and because they do, other things happen as well, for good and for ill, especially when human agency is part of the mix.

Crawford and the other writers we study in my seminar offer insights into human engagement with matter that may help answer a question that many in honors education will raise: how is gardening an appropriate subject for high-ability college students? To the extent that efforts to raise plants by relatively nonviolent means teaches and disciplines students in an ethical way to be in the world, I feel no need to apologize for a seminar in organic horticulture. To the extent that honing gardening skills and sharing the fruits of a season's labor contribute to the development of self-confident yet paradoxically humble adults who are inclined to greater thoughtfulness about the material enactment of their intellectual and ethical commitments, I am proud to be the creator and teacher of such a course and am grateful to my university for giving it a place in the honors curriculum.

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